Teaching Reflexive Practice in Archives: Questioning Permanence, Evidence, and Institutions

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The archives’ emphasis on external, fixed (usually textual) documents, as proof of the past is reflective of a worldview in which truth is determined through objective external analysis.
In Frank Boles’ Selecting & Appraising Archives and Manuscripts (Archival Fundamentals Series II) he states that “the European Archives have been particularly concerned with dispositive (largely legal) evidence and knowledge-making secondarily. There are pragmatic reasons for this hierarchy of focus – there is a long-standing belief amongst archivists that it is the unconscious evidence that results as a by-product of business, legal, or social transactions that ensures neutrality and objectivity in the records content. I.e. that the record is trustworthy. It is what it claims to be because it was not made to “fool” us later. Permanence and records vetted via institutional provenance also relate to this core cultural concept of evidence.
Evidence in Anglo-European Thought

- Current Western notions of evidence arise from ways of knowing developed during the scientific revolution in Europe.
  - Quantification and objectification
  - Experimentation
  - Distrust of the subjective
  - Universal Laws

Several themes occurred during the time of the scientific revolution: scholars of the time tried to reduce the natural world into quantifiable and discrete elements (corpuscular philosophy) that could be understood mathematically. Along with this analysis, scholars attempted to identify universal truths that were uniformly applicable. Given that the world view of the time and place was largely focused on the external objective world, the idea of universal laws fits right in. If there is an ultimate, uniform, external world that everyone is in and is moving through in the same way, then it made sense to assume that individual experiences of this uniform world would be subject to same parameters.
Early modern scholars were concerned with the effects their own subjectivity had on their ability to observe and understand the natural world. Thus, an emphasis was placed on that which could be demonstrated via public experiment (and thus open to public inspection), that which could be demonstrated mathematically, and that which was objective and external.
Legal frameworks for evidence give greatest credibility to that which can be empirically observed, logically tested, or that which is vetted by a “relevant” scientific community.

Historical frameworks for evidence largely operate on an inference system – singular evidence is not usually considered for an argument, but a gathering of similar evidence may be enough for reasonable inference.

While the concept of historical evidence does not map exactly to legal notions of evidence, both require some kind of pragmatic heuristic to determine sufficiency for inference.
The ability to verify the source over time is essential to the present (or future) generation's ability to “check up” on the claims of the past. Without permanence of source materials, there is only trust in what we have been told or what has been previously claimed.

Here again, the connection to the past and the treatment of heritage assumed by the practice of document preservation seems to indicate a cultural perspective.

Permanence

- Permanence is assumed as a universal value, but is only recently being questioned as a default
- Because of external validity requirement for Western understandings of evidence, sources of evidences must necessarily endure over time.
American archives had a close tie to institutional recordkeeping. Institutions create the bulk of historical records and archives, as institutions themselves, retain and describe the records of their own and other institutions.

This links in with the anglo-european ideas of evidence as objective, neutral, and open to public inspection.

Thus, many records are “vetted” through institutional creation. They are assumed to be unconscious and thus semi-trustworthy. Indigenous communities, as mentioned in the Protocols, thus appear in the archive most frequently through the institutional lens. People are described and recorded only as they are of interest and of relevance to the record-creating institution.

The emphasis on records arising from record-creating institutions also has an obvious tie to a social structure in which people are organized into separate legal entities.
I.e. the requirement for external objectivity may exclude all non-fixed records, or records that are carried in memory rather than documents or texts.
Work as a practitioner:

Learning names of individuals rather than ethnographic descriptions
Recognizing and admitting that as someone of other ethnic descent, I simply didn’t know and didn’t have the cultural context to understand what I was looking at.
Teaching students about the cultural origins of western views of truth and evidence.